

Tales From
Africa

Retold by
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The Blacksmith's Dilemma

There was once a blacksmith called Walukaga, who was very skilled at all kinds of metal-work. Every day a small crowd of people would gather at his smithy and watch him at work making hoes for the farmers, knives and spears for the hunters, or armlets and bracelets to decorate the young men and maidens.

Early one morning, as Walukaga was beginning work, pumping his sheepskin bellows to make a glowing charcoal fire, a messenger from the king's court arrived.

'His Majesty says you are to go and see him immediately. He has a job for you to do,' said the messenger.

Walukaga was delighted and hastily putting on his best white robes he hurried off to the palace, wondering what the king wanted him to do. He passed many of his friends about their early-morning tasks in the dusty roads, and to all of them he shouted happily:

'The king has sent for me! He has some work for me to do. Wish me luck!'

Walukaga reached the palace and was shown into a little room by the gate, where he waited some time until the king was ready to receive him. Then he was taken into

the inner courtyard where the king sat on a stool carved from a single piece of tree-trunk.

The blacksmith bowed to the ground, and when he rose the king said:

'I have sent for you, the most skilful blacksmith in the district, because I have a very special task to give you.' He clapped his hands and several servants appeared with their arms full of odd-shaped pieces of iron which they placed at the king's feet.

'You are to take this metal and change it into a man,' said the king. 'Not just a statue, but a living man of iron who can walk and talk and think, and who has blood in his veins.'

Walukaga was flabbergasted. He searched the king's face to see whether perhaps this was a joke, but the king's dark, serious eyes showed that he was in earnest, so Walukaga decided to go home and think it over.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' he replied, bowing low once more, and the interview was over.

The king's servants helped the blacksmith carry the iron to his smithy, and Walukaga followed them slowly, scarcely returning the greetings of his friends in the town, who wondered what was wrong. Later in the day they came to see him and when he told them what the king had commanded, they too fell silent.

Everyone in that country knew that the king had the power of life and death over his subjects and that if anyone failed to carry out an order, he would be put to death, so poor Walukaga began to think his days were numbered. All day and all night he sat with his head in his hands, wondering how to find a solution to his problem. Of course, a number of people made suggestions. Could he not make an iron shell of a man and persuade

somebody to get inside it and speak and walk? Should he run away to a far country and begin life afresh where he was not known? Someone even suggested he bribe the palace cook to put poison in the king's food, since Walukaga himself would surely die within a few days unless the king died first.

Poor Walukaga! He became ill and thin, since he could not sleep or eat, and began roaming the bush alone, speaking his thoughts aloud as he tried to think of a plan to save himself from death.

One evening, as he walked through a deserted stretch of bush, he heard weird singing, and going closer to investigate, he discovered a boyhood friend of his who had now, alas, become mad and lived alone in the wild country outside the town.

'Greetings, Walukaga,' called the madman, who had no difficulty in remembering the blacksmith, even though his mind was so often muddled about other things. 'How kind of you to visit me. Come, sit down and share my supper.'

The madman was harmless enough and Walukaga had nothing else to do, so he sat on a rock beside him and together they ate ripe berries and some honey which the madman had collected from the wild bees. Walukaga suddenly realized that this was the first food he had eaten for several days, and felt better for it, so he decided to humour his old friend and told him the story of the king's demand. To his surprise, the madman sat quite still and listened to the end without interrupting.

'Well,' concluded Walukaga, 'that is my story; and if you can tell me what I am to do, you will be a better friend than any other, for they cannot help me.'

Almost immediately the madman had the answer.

'I know what you must do,' he said. 'Go to the king and tell him that you can only make the kind of man he requires if you have special kinds of charcoal and water. Ask him to make all his subjects shave their heads and bring the hair to be burnt into charcoal and when you have a thousand loads of such charcoal, that will be enough. Then say you must have a hundred pots of water made up from the tears of the king's people, since only such water may be used to keep your fire from burning too fiercely.'

When the madman had said this, he laughed uproariously for some minutes, while the blacksmith tried in vain to thank him for such good advice and then hurried off to the king's palace, in spite of the lateness of the hour.

He bowed low before the king and explained what he must have before he could begin work on the iron man. The king was quite agreeable and sent messages to all his subjects the next morning, commanding them to shave their heads for charcoal and to weep into their water-pots.

The people did their best, wondering at this strange request, and not daring to disobey their powerful king, but try as they would, it was impossible to collect more than two pots of tears or even one load of charcoal.

When the results of this proclamation were brought to the king, he sighed.

'Alas! I can see that we shall never be able to collect all the charcoal and water that Walukaga needs. Send for him to come here at once.'

With shaking legs Walukaga approached the king, and as he looked up was relieved to see a smile on his face.

'Walukaga,' he said. 'You have asked something impossible. I see now that my people can never grow

enough hair to produce a thousand loads of charcoal, nor weep enough tears to fill a hundred water-pots. I therefore exempt you from your task.'

'Your Majesty,' replied Walukaga. 'I am indeed grateful to you, for you too, asked something impossible of me. I could never have made a living man from iron, try as I would.'

Then all the people laughed when they realized how cleverly Walukaga had got out of his fix, and the king allowed him to go home and continue his work at the smithy. But the blacksmith never forgot that it was his friend's advice which had saved him, and saw that the madman never went hungry or thirsty to the end of his life.